“You Can Dance If You Want To”

2 Samuel 6:1-6; 12b-19

Ephesians 1:3-14

Sarah Wolf

July 11, 2021

Picture it: Strasbourg, 1518. On a hot summer day in July, not unlike the days we’ve been having lately, a woman begins dancing in the street in a small, French town. Soon, somewhere between 50 and 400 other people join her and they dance non-stop for 2 months.  At the height of this dancing hysteria, often referred to as the Dancing Plague,  some sources claim that the mania killed up to 15 people a day.  There are some theories which attempt to explain this dancing plague — stress-induced mass hysteria, demonic possession, even food poisoning, but no one really knows what initially caused the first woman to start dancing on that July day, nor the many people who joined her.

Now we, the 21st Century critical historians that we may be, may not be able to understand that kind of dancing contagion, but I bet David and his men do.  When today’s text begins, they are in the process of moving the Ark of God, which contained the original tablets from Moses, from its temporary home in the encampments of David’s army to Jerusalem.  David and his army, with God’s help, have finally captured Jerusalem after several battles with the Philistines. They are ready to claim Jerusalem as their capital city and rename it Zion. Finally, the people of Israel will have a home. Finally, God will have a home.

In his crazed dancing, David is celebrating not just that his people will have a home, or that God will finally have a permanent home in Jerusalem, but that they have prevailed in their battles and finally have a capital city, and they know that none of this would have been possible without God.

As one commentator says, “The dance...is the fullest expression of gratitude because they know that they were saved from peril, not by their own strength and cunning, but solely by the grace of God.  It is the kind of celebration that is contagious; it draws people.”

And who is it that starts the dance? It’s David. He’s the first brave soul on the dance floor. And once his men see him, fully giving way to ecstatic joy and worship through dance, the contagion hits them as well. They jump in, all 30,000 of them, dancing with their whole bodies, bringing instruments to the dance floor with them: lyres and harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals. It’s a cacophony of joy and David is its catalyst.

But not everyone is happy. Not everyone catches the dancing fever. Michal, who the text tells us is Saul’s daughter, but who *also* happens to be David’s wife, looks at David with scorn. What in the world is her husband doing?

“We do not do that here.  We never have done it that way.  Our fathers never danced before God,” she wants to say to him as one theologian suggests.  Or in other words maybe…: “Stop embarrassing me.”

We may be tempted to judge Michal right here. Why is she trying to restrain and contain David’s joy? After all, David has a lot for which to be grateful: God has helped him prevail over the Philistines. God has helped turn a ragtag group of tribes into a unified Kingdom. God has helped David secure not just a political capital for that kingdom, but now, a religious capital as well. God has provided and kept David and his men out of danger *and* God has made good on the promise to provide a homeland for Israel. Of course David wants to celebrate.

But Michal does not approve. David has crossed a line. He’s bypassed the traditional form of worship in favor of something more charismatic, something more visceral, something that is embodied. It’s just not done.

We might be tempted to judge Michal right here, but….can we?

My bet is, if someone walked into our sanctuary today and started to speak aloud, out of turn, about the wonderful things that God has done for them, much less...*dance*, we might also adopt a Michal look. We might look at that person and say….that’s just too much. As I say this, I know that I would probably join you in that judgement. There’s a time and a place, right? We don’t do things *that* way.

On Wednesday, I served communion at Baldwin Park to the folks there and we talked about this passage. I asked if anyone grew up with any dancing at their churches. They responded not just with silent head shakes, but with audible, “No ways.”  One person even mentioned that some of us Presbyterians are known as the “frozen chosen.” Our own Mary Beth Finley brought up the controversy of clapping after the choir sings a particularly moving anthem.

It’s a controversy that’s worth talking about. Because, what are we doing in worship? Are John and I performing? Is the choir performing?  Is the congregation the audience? Where does God fit in?

In Soren Kierkegaard’s “Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing,” Kierkegaard forces the reader to rethink how worship is constructed.  While it may at first appear that in the act of worship, John, Jeff, Chris, and I are the actors on stage and the congregation is the audience, Kierkegaard places all of the human components — minister, choir, organist,liturgist, *and congregation* on stage in the cast of worship and places God in the audience.

All that we do in worship is for the benefit of and for glory to God. God is the one who observes our worship, not us. Whenever we sit in the congregation, we do so not as passive observers, but as active participants in worship.

So when we applaud when the choir performs — whenever that might next be — perhaps we are also members of the same cast, on the same stage, giving kudos to our fellow cast mates.  When we hear an especially moving anthem and we are moved to applause...might that just be our own attempt to thank God for providing the musical talents of our choir in the first place?

I spoke with Amy Bussey about the role of the audience in relation to the cast and she said that a play or performance without an audience is empty and without purpose. So when our choir, or when John or I preach, or when anyone gets up and praises God, we trust that God is right there with us, interacting with the cast and breathing life into worship.

We all bring something to worship.  We all bring something to present to God in worship. What do you bring?

It might not be dancing with the same fury with which David danced.  But it *should* be something. It can be prayer. It can be song. It can be interpretation of scripture. It can be lending a loving ear to someone in pain. It can be any number of things…

And the thing is, it doesn’t have to be *good*. At no point does the writer of today’s text tell us, “And David got all the steps to the Macarena *right*.” David is so fully consumed in his worship of God that we don’t even care if he’s dancing on the beat.

I remember one Christmas Eve at my home church, someone accidentally left the mic of our senior pastor on. Haywood was many things — a wonderful preacher, evangelist, and teacher, but one of the things he was not known for was his vocal talents. And yet here we were on Christmas Eve, and someone left Haywood’s mic on for Joy to the World. And….it was perfect. I don’t mean to say that there had been a Christmas miracle and suddenly Haywood’s voice was perfect — far from it.  But the joy with which he sung was...whole-bodied. On top of the entire congregation and choir we could hear Haywood’s practical shouts, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come!” In that moment, we forgot about Haywood’s singing abilities and thought only of what the real joy of Christ’s coming to earth meant: Good news for ALL humankind!

What David is teaching us in this moment in 2 Samuel is that worship should be wholly-experienced.  Yes, it may look differently  from person to person, but we are all active participants, all called to bring our whole selves into worship.

David does a wonderful job of modeling what worship will look like for God’s people in Jerusalem *and* for God’s people today.  When we think of David, we don’t often think of him first and foremost as a worship leader, but more often as a political and military leader — the one who killed Goliath, united the tribes of Israel, and established Jerusalem as its capital.  But here, David is taking on the role of worship leader, showing the people how worship should be done — with our whole selves.  David shows that his primary allegiance is not to the newly-formed nation of Israel, but to the One who made it all possible — God.

I don’t think we give David enough credit for the way that he models whole-self worship of God. In addition to his dancing craze that involves the other 30,000 men with him, he models what worship has to lead to — service.

At the end of this fantastic display of worship, we are told that David distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins.

As gross as we might find raisin cake to be (and I apologize to those for whom raisin cake is the best dessert ever), we need to pay attention to the meaning behind them: worship without praxis means nothing.  Worship without being changed in some way is meaningless.

1 Corinthians 13 says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Likewise, if I dance like David or sing like Miriam or preach like Paul, but don’t put any of these words into action, then the act of worship is meaningless.

We come here, whether in person or tuned in online, to be changed in worship. To give thanks to God, to confess our brokenness, to hear the Word read and proclaimed, to pray for one another, to offer up our thanksgivings, and to be changed in the process, that we might in turn go out and change the world in our own small ways.

That’s what David was up to in his dancing daze...to give thanks for all that God has done and to declare his intention of being a part of all that God will continue to do.

When we come to worship, we join in the long line of folks who have worshiped God throughout the years.  While the instrumentations, liturgical colors, and the sermon topics might have changed, every single person must be willing to put their all into it, to be changed by it, and to put that change into practice.

The word “liturgy” means...the work of the people. When we are in worship, we are at work, worshiping God and being changed by God.

So, you can dance if you want to...We won’t kick you out. You can sing. You can shout. You can sit quietly and pray and listen. But what we all must do is...work.

All praise be to God. Amen.